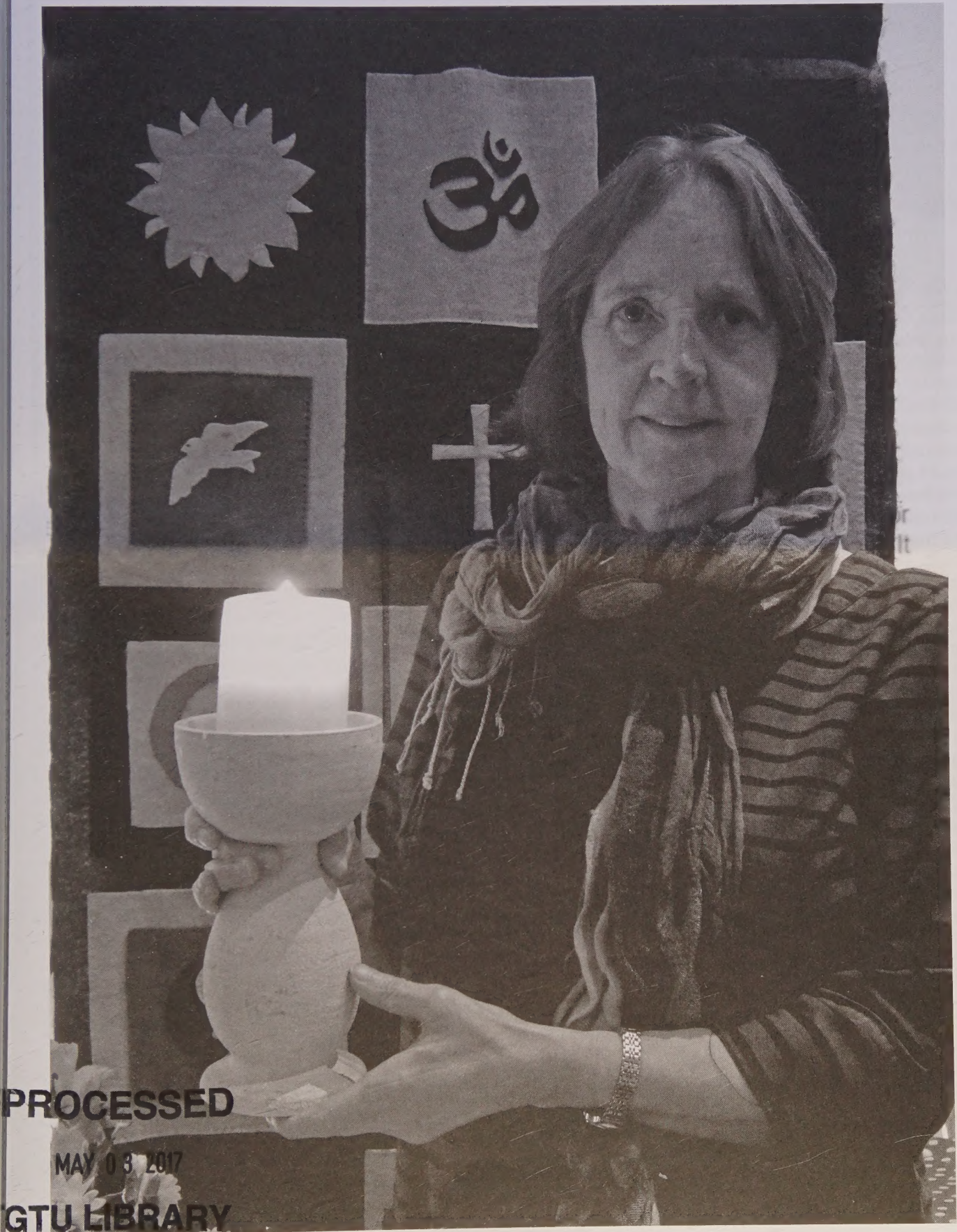


# The INQUIRER £1

[www.inquirer.org.uk](http://www.inquirer.org.uk)

the voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7913 22 April 2017



PROCESSED

MAY 03 2017

GTU LIBRARY

*The future is in our hands*



# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest  
Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

The Inquirer is published fortnightly  
by The Inquirer Publishing Company  
(2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

**Editor** M Colleen Burns MA

46A Newmarket Road

Cringleford

Norwich NR4 6UF

ph: 01603 505281

e: [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com)

**Copyeditor** Sarah Reynolds

**Cover photo** by Ed Fordham

**Articles** express the views of their authors. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the author's original work or be attributed appropriately.

**Subscribe** Annual subscriptions are £35 with discounts for bulk orders.

Cheques payable to 'The Inquirer'.

Write to James Barry

24 Lodge Lane

Keymer, Hassocks

West Sussex, BN6 8NA

ph: 01273 844940

e: [admin@inquirer.org.uk](mailto:admin@inquirer.org.uk)

**Advertise** for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £95 plus VAT. Contact the editor for details.

**Births, marriages and deaths** are 50p a word plus VAT.

**Find out more** about Unitarians

[www.unitarian.org.uk](http://www.unitarian.org.uk)

or email [info@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:info@unitarian.org.uk)

The General Assembly, Essex Hall

1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384

## Unitarian General Assembly 2017



Delegates arrive at the General Assembly meetings held in Birmingham. The next Inquirer will carry full reports. Photo by James Barry

### Inquiring Words

Eternal Spirit, Great Mystery beyond our ideas, God of many names, and none.

At this time, in this place, we are grateful for this community of Unitarians, for this gathering of potential.

*In our hands, we have the opportunity to connect with one another, to strengthen our bonds of friendship and commitment.*

We know the world in which we live in is fragmented, riven with conflict, filled with terror and tormented with hatred.

*In our hands, we have the opportunity to create peace, to heal division, to build a better way.*

Yet the world in which we live is beautiful too. It is a place where goodness can thrive, where life is bountiful, from where we are nourished.

*In our hands, we have the opportunity to hold on to that beauty, to protect it from damage, to help preserve it for future generations.*

Great Spirit of Life, let us be the builders of the future, may we be generous and caring, honest and compassionate, with unconditional love for all in need.

*In our hands lies the future. May our hearts and our minds join with them in making this world a better place.*

Amen

*A responsive reading, written by Daniel Costley for the 2017  
Anniversary Service held at the Unitarian General Assembly meetings  
in Birmingham.*



# The future is not yet written

In a heartfelt and encouraging Anniversary Sermon, **Sarah Tinker** told the gathered delegates, 'Our future is in our own hands'.

Once you reach a certain age you have a sure fire way of entertaining children. Just tell them what life was like when you were their age. What might you tell them? I had a grandmother with an outside toilet and chickens roaming freely on her kitchen floor; we had a very small black and white TV – with just the one channel; we did have a telephone, but only one, wired to the wall; us children of the 50s usually had two sets of clothes – a school uniform and the clothes you wore at home, with maybe a special outfit for going out. Clothes were so expensive that they had to last a good few years – so you'd often wear hand-me-downs from children who'd grown out of them. And I can't be the only one who was bought a school blazer far too big for me which I had to grow into. Depending on your age, you'll have your own entertaining version of 'life in the olden days'. These stories remind us of the simple truth that things change.

At our Annual Meetings young people's group talked about what changes there might be in the course of their lifetimes. They've predicted driverless cars, individual jet packs allowing us all to propel ourselves high above crowded city streets, burgers made of insect-based protein, humans travelling to Mars, contact with extra-terrestrial beings, and robots doing lots of the boring work for us so we can all have more fun. I've tried not to be too pessimistic in my response to their ideas. But I do remember the prediction of paperless offices when computers and email communication arrived on the scene. Yet are you, like me, risking drowning under ever increasing piles of paper?

## Beatles were 'finished'

Imagine trying to explain developments like the Internet or contactless payment cards or smart phones, or skyscrapers built of glass, to previous generations. It's hard to predict the future and that's why anyone who dares to make such predictions risks looking a bit foolish. Charlie Chaplin managed to misjudge the future of cinema when in 1916 he described it as 'merely a fad'. A Decca records executive, turning the Beatles down after an audition in 1962, apparently predicted that 'Groups are out. Four-piece groups with guitars, particularly, are finished'. Marconi, the radio pioneer, said in 1912 that 'the coming of the radio era will make war impossible, because it will make war ridiculous.' Ridiculous, yes; heart-rending, yes; impossible, sadly no. Not yet anyway.

Recently I met up with a young couple to plan their wedding ceremony. Their joyful exuberance left me thinking about my own emotional state, which could currently be described



2016 GA President Dot Hewerdine (front left) and, clockwise, the Rev Kate McKenna, Derek McAuley, the Revs Daniel Costley, Sarah Tinker and the Rev Dr Ralph Catts. Kate and Ralph were welcomed to the ministerial roll at the Anniversary Service.

as 'somewhat gloomy'. Don't let me bring you down if these concerns are not on your emotional radar at present but these are some of the issues on my 'current concerns' list:

- Climate change and humanity's shocking failure to respond to its threats.
- The pressure placed on vulnerable species and the reduction in bio-diversity caused by human population growth and consequent loss of habitats.
- The inherent contradiction between the economic system of capitalism, depending as it does on sustaining economic growth, which means selling us more stuff, and living on a planet with finite resources, where we have to deal with all the rubbish we throw away.
- The inevitable increase in global migration and the way fear of this can be manipulated by those wishing to spread hatred.
- The possibility that a small number of dramatic acts of terror, over-reported by sensation-seeking news media, could be used as justification by governments to reduce civil liberties, civil rights long campaigned for by those who came before us.

These times in which we live are making some of us uncomfortable and anxious. We scan history for fear it might be repeating itself. Yet would you agree with me that the future is not only unknown, it does not exist?

## What may yet emerge?

Our faith rejected concepts of pre-destination long ago. In troubling times we may find ourselves slipping into fatalistic ways of thinking. Rather than trying to predict a non-existent future we might do better to ask ourselves 'what might be emerging?' The future does not exist. It does not exist for us as individuals, nor for our movement, nor for our wider world. What we have is potential. That is what rests in our hands. All of us have the potential to shape that which is emerging. We can be co-creators of a future which is yet to unfold.

Our Unitarian and Free Christian movement developed dur-

*(Continued on next page)*



# Reach out with the power of love

(Continued from previous page)

ing times of tumultuous change. The Reformation and the growth of non-conformity were part of dramatic social, political and economic disturbances. The struggles of previous generations, and their efforts to create a free religious movement, have brought us to where we are today. Their unfinished agenda is now ours. What should be on that agenda in the 21st century? In some management circles you will hear talk of encouraging an organisation's evolutionary purpose to emerge through a process of sensing and responding to what is.

What might our evolutionary purpose be? What might we best sense and respond to in this busy, complex world of ours?

I appreciate colleagues who are pointing out to us, at the General Assembly meetings and in the pages of *The Inquirer*, that our quota payment numbers continue to fall. Many of us know shrinking congregations with older age profiles and buildings that may feel like millstones rather than sacred spaces. Many of us know of congregations unlikely to exist in 10 years' time.

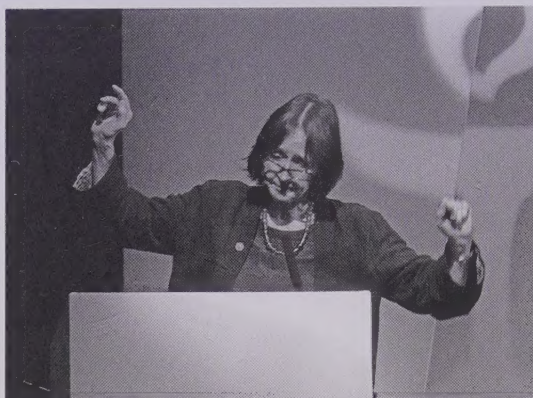
## Giving up time and money to participate

We might question the likelihood of our movement surviving, certainly in its current form. That might seem a heretical statement standing at the GA anniversary service with some 350 people who've given up precious holiday time, hard-earned money, time with others, to attend the Annual Meetings. Thank you to those who came to the meetings and for being part of such an energised few days. It seems rather churlish to be echoing the Dad's Army character who used to tell us, 'We're doomed, we're all doomed'.

The philosophical position first described by Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza '*Sub specie aeternitatis*', translated as 'under the aspect of eternity', can be a healthy reminder that if we take a long enough viewpoint then all human institutions and endeavours can be expected to crumble. What were those words of Matthew Smith and David Kent's Chalice Meditation – 'many things will change'? Well in truth *all* things will change and all things come to an end. We are indeed all doomed. Taking the long view can lead to 'what's the point'? It can also lead us to 'we might as well'. The great spirit, of which I believe we all are part, will cope with our disappearance. But look for a moment at your own hands. Give your fingers a wiggle if you'd like to. You and your hands are here now. And be aware of all the other hands in the movement. And if hands don't do it for you as a metaphor then think of our minds. Whether we are currently awake or asleep there are interesting sparks continually firing in these brains of ours. Life is movement and movement brings change. And we know from the theory of systems that one change in one tiny part of a system will bring about changes elsewhere in that same system, changes that could not have been predicted.

The future does not yet exist.

We are tiny, individual elements of multiple systems. It's a human trait to imagine that we have far greater control over our own lives and the organisations we are part of than is ap-



Sarah Tinker: 'Taking the long view can lead to 'what's the point'? It can also lead us to 'we might as well'. Photo by Ed Fordham

parently the case. And yet we might as well act as though we do make a difference, because of course we do. Our smallest actions, our chance encounters with another, the words we choose to speak or keep silent – all have an effect, for good or ill. As I looked around at everyone at the service, a gathering of individuals, many represented Unitarian groups around the country, I became hopeful of our power to make a difference. If our ways of measuring our membership are anything like accurate then we who gathered in Birmingham represent over 10% of the United

Kingdom's Unitarian & Free Christian movement. In various theories of organisational change, 10% is the minimum you need to bring about new ways of being. I'm not alone in often quoting words attributed to the highly regarded anthropologist Margaret Mead: '*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world*'.

## We must not shut the world out

There is so much in our world that we have so little power over. Yet we Unitarians do have valuable resources held in trust for the wider communities of which we are part. This is the legacy bequeathed by our religious forebears. We are gatherings of people, stewarding both physical and financial assets. We offer a particularly open way of exploring matters of faith and we're part of an unfolding history – a history of dissent from fixed ways of thinking, a history of courage in the face of oppression. I spoke of congregations likely to close in the next 10 years. Yet I could also tell you of congregations now thriving that at one time were likely candidates for closure. It is not easy to predict the future. It's also not easy in 21st century Britain to give liberal religious communities a blueprint of how to succeed and flourish. What those now thriving congregations seem to have in common is that they have nothing in common. Though if you look a little closer, you might notice that they have all turned outwards to consider what the world might need from them.

We cannot, and clearly should not, shut ourselves off from the troubles of our world. But perhaps the idea of thinking globally and acting locally can guide us. We won't find our evolutionary purpose by turning inwards and focusing entirely on our own concerns, nor by turning outwards and trying to deal with each and every world problem that there is. Sometimes all we can do is to bear witness to the sufferings of others. But for each of us and for each of our communities there are tasks with which we can engage, there are other groups of people who share similar concerns and commitments with whom we can join. It perhaps matters less what we do than that we do something. Utilising the power of love to reach out to others, we can share what we have. As skies darken, the light of the spirit grows stronger to remind us of the loving potential resting here, here in our hands.

*The Rev Sarah Tinker is minister with Kensington Unitarians.*



# 'Dualitarians' might suit us better

The Hilton Metropole Hotel, close by the NEC, Birmingham, was again the venue for the Unitarian General Assembly Annual Meetings. It is an enormous conference centre with hundreds of rooms offering every kind of facility. Our GA reception desk stood in the main foyer and was probably the first thing that anyone saw when they came in, whoever they were. What did they make of it? The Unitarians, of course, were glad to see smiling faces, waiting to register participants and hand them their packs of papers and voting cards. They could also purchase a useful *Inquirer* 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary lanyard in bright purple on which to hang their nametag. Non-Unitarians, attending some other conference, or arriving perhaps to tackle health problems in the spa or the swimming pool, will have been puzzled by our banners. As well as prompting the inevitable 'Unitarian? What's that?' question which surely arose in their minds, the fact that our banners were in Welsh as well as English will surely have added to their puzzlement. Croeso i Garfoarfodydd Blynyddol yr Undodaidd looks beautiful and intriguing, and I'm glad to give it a special mention. The Opening Celebration event on our first night was presented by a large Welsh contingent, with singers, actors and musicians sharing with us highlights from Welsh Unitarian history, partly in Welsh, mostly in English. A sequence of facts and memories of historical events, of which our Welsh sisters and brothers are passionately proud, was a wonderfully uplifting start for the Meetings.

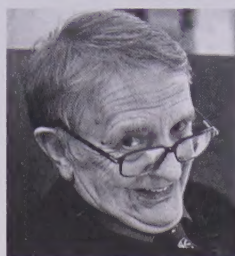
\*\*\*

This prompted me to think how ironic it is that though we call ourselves Unitarians, and the 'unit' part of our name conveys 'oneness', in fact we seem to have two of almost everything. We have two names, Unitarian and Free Christian. We use two languages, English and Welsh, even on our headed notepaper. We have two governing bodies, the General Assembly and the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. There are two colleges, Unitarian College and Harris Manchester College and two newspapers, the *Inquirer* and the *Unitarian*. There are even two women's organisations, the Women's League and the Unitarian Women's Group. Some can even discern two wings on the spectrum of our theological preferences. Ah, but there's only one Nightingale Centre, thank heaven! And only one GA Annual Meetings event, which is busy and varied enough in its activities to include a wide range of types and styles.

\*\*\*

I enjoy catching up with overseas visitors. The Rev Sara Ascher from Massachusetts was there as the newly appointed Executive Director of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. She has recently returned from a tour of Africa where new congregations have emerged in recent years, having discovered Unitarianism mostly through the wonders of the internet. She told us how she thoroughly enjoyed meeting and greeting and eating and dancing and worshipping with our African co-religionists, sometimes doing all of those things almost simultaneously, no exaggeration! 'Welcome to our church, sit down and start eating before the dancing starts!' Sara has replaced Steve Dick in this post and brings sparkling enthusiasm and her own personal style to this work. She is encouraging us all to attend the next ICUU Council Meeting in the Khasi Hills, India, in February 2018.

\*\*\*



## Funny Old World at the GA

By John Midgley

Good also to catch up with Rev. Petr Samojski, minister of Prague Unitarians, there with two of his members, Lucie Hrabankova and Kristyna Ledereova. I asked them how they had coped with the Welsh language in the Opening Celebration, but they simply laughed and gave a puzzled shrug. Many English folk react in the same way, shame on us. Petr spent a month in the UK last year, serving our Edinburgh congregation as visiting minister. Back in Prague, he tells me, there is good growth. He has launched an in-house Academy. This is a study scheme, with modular learning and mentoring, on a range of courses with a diploma at the end. This is to cultivate men and women for various leadership roles, possibly leading on to full-status ministry. Following the Anniversary Service with its theme of 'It's in Our Hands', it was enjoyable also to catch up with the Rev Bridget Spain from Dublin, who reports good news from Cork, where the congregation now has a new minister, serving in their 300-year-old meeting house. 'It shows every single one of its 300 years of age, but a start has been made,' she reported. 'I always feel uplifted by these GA meetings, and the "In your hands" message was just right for me to take back to the enthusiasts at Cork, as they set about renovating their building.'

\*\*\*

Was this one of the last Annual Meetings that will cover four days? We feel conflicted about the suggestion of reducing it to three. We'd like to keep costs down, but not miss the opportunities this stimulating get-together offers. The discussion continues.

\*\*\*

Back home then, to find mail behind the door with something delightfully local, in contrast to these international encounters. I like to keep an eye on the calendar of my first congregation, Padiham, and I smiled at this titbit from its President, Tony Cann:

'I have got myself an electric bike. You have to pedal, but it makes it easier if you come to a hill. I sometimes think it is like God – helpful but you have to put in the effort. The first time I went out I did fall off – but that was when I stopped and forgot to take my foot out of the pedal strap. I could cycle to chapel (over Pendle Hill) but it would take me an hour. I might try it in the summer.'

'This coming Saturday I am attending the induction of the new Dean at Blackburn Cathedral. I will be going with Rauf of the Sufi Free Spiritual Centre in Nelson. I would like the Cathedral to do more interfaith work – perhaps they will take the hint.'

Good luck with that Tony. And the electric bicycle. Who says Unitarians don't do theology these days?

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*



# '50 Shades of Grace': Relly Beard

By Carla A Grosch-Miller

When I write about sex, I am aware that readers and I are walking on holy ground. This is not an abstract issue – our worst thinking about sex happens when we treat it that way. Our sexual being and expression is deeply personal, embodied and a place where joy and suffering (and more mundane feelings) may reside. I know from the statistics that many of us will have had sexual experiences that were traumatising or confusing. So as you read this excerpt, take good care of your precious self.

We dip into the Bible to seek where biblical sexual ethics come from. The Hebrew people had a more wholistic and earthy view of sexual being than many second- to fourth-century Christians. Given the high infant and child mortality rates, procreation was the principal driver of biblical sexual ethics.

A fertile woman had to give birth to more than five live children to replace her generation with the next<sup>1</sup>. There were rigid gender roles: men owned women, and their right to be sexual aggressors is asserted in biblical sexual ethics – so long as they were not putting the community at risk by their sexual behaviour. A man was not allowed to have sex with a woman owned by another man; 'adultery' was a violation of another man's property rights. The community was focused on procreation and upheld men as sexual aggressors, so a man having sex with another man was forbidden.

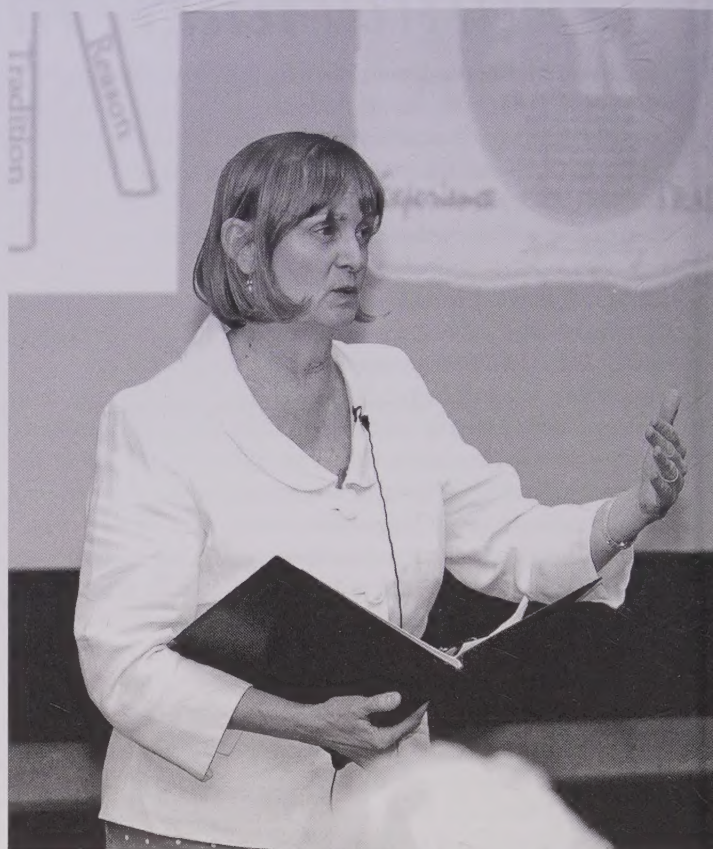
The sexual ethics in the Hebrew Bible centre on three things: Procreation (for obvious reasons), property (as in the adultery rules) and 'purity'. The purity rules show up in Leviticus. The Hebrew people did not expect anyone outside of their community to follow the holiness codes. The word 'holiness' means 'to be set apart'. The codes developed as the freed slaves moved into Canaan ('the Promised Land') and lived among people with other gods. Holiness rules ordered what they could eat, when they had to wash, what they could wear – and how they behaved in community. It reminded them: I belong to my people.

Purity thinking is about each thing having its own ideal form. If breached, it was 'unclean' and had to be restored. For instance, the 'normal/ideal' state of a woman was nonmenstrual. Blood belongs in the body. Ideally, she married at puberty, and then was pregnant or nursing until death or menopause. So while she was menstruating, her essential being was compromised. She was unclean. Upon the cessation of bleeding, she had to be ritually cleansed to restore her to the community. This way of thinking continues in some orthodox Jewish and Christian communities. A vestige of it is the reluctance of some communions to accept the ordination of women.

Purity thinking prohibited the mixing of things. For instance, a field can't contain two kinds of seeds; fabric can't be woven with two kinds of fibres. Regarding incest, a son should not combine the roles of son and sexual rival to his father. The prohibition against incest is about purity and property. Our understanding of adultery being a betrayal and breach of trust within a marriage would have no meaning to ancient Hebrews.

The first Holiness code, Lev. Ch. 11-16, is concerned with rites of purification. The second holiness code, Lev. Ch. 17-26, is concerned with the historical consequences of uncleanness for the community. The community is called on to cleanse itself by removing offenders. Here we find the death penalty for adultery, for 'men who lie with other men as with a woman', for children who curse their parents, for the human and the animal in the case of bestiality, and for those who commit certain types of incest.

What of the Holiness Codes survives for our times? First I'd like to suggest that our bodily actions express our faith, our most deeply held beliefs and values. Faith is an embodied thing; it impacts our actions. How we choose to express our sexual being reflects those values and beliefs. One of the great failures of traditional Christian sexual ethics has been that it focused on form over content, defining 'legitimate' sexual activity as that taking place in a heterosexual marriage. It said



Carla A Grosch-Miller gave the John Relly Beard lecture. An excerpt of her talk appears on this page. Photo by Molly Ramsay

nothing about the content of that sexual activity, leaving people vulnerable to rape and abuse within marriage. A second pearl of wisdom from the Holiness Codes comes from its acknowledgement that individual sexual expression impacts the community. As second-wave feminists said, the personal is political. Society has an interest in sex to ensure the stability of partnerships and families, the protection of the vulnerable and the welfare of children. Unbridled sexual activity can threaten community wellbeing; abuse can destroy lives.

What do the Apostolic Writings in the New Testament have to say about sex? Not much, but interestingly, the first chapter of the Gospel is very sexily scandalous.

## Jesus and sex

At the beginning of Matthew (1:1-18) the lineage of Jesus includes five women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary), all tainted with sexual scandal. What is peculiar about this is that Luke's genealogy, like Hebrew Bible genealogies, has no women in it (Luke 3:38). Despite the sexy start, sex is not a primary concern in the gospels or other NT writings. Outside of the adulterous woman who is forgiven in John – *let the one who is without sin cast the first stone* – Jesus' only teachings that touch on sexuality regard divorce and lust. By the first century of the CE, polygamy had waned, perhaps in adaptation to the Greco-Roman value of monogamy. The theory of marriage was changing.

In Mark 10:1-16 and Matthew 19:1-12, asked if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife, Jesus, citing Genesis, said no – *what God has joined together, let no one separate*. He then redefined adultery as saying whoever divorces their spouse and marries another, commits adultery against their first partner. Through his prohibition of divorce and redefinition of adultery, Jesus altered marriage and family life in a highly significant way. He was taking the wife out of the realm of disposable property and making her equal to her husband. In a sense, he was undermining ancient marriage. Marriage became indissoluble unity in the flesh, which recognised the equality of the sexes made in the image of God. The disciples were disturbed by



# turer brings sex-positive message

Christianity owes a huge debt particularly to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual Christians who have stayed in what has been – and too often still is – a toxic Church. It has been their presence, their courage and their vulnerability that has made some of the progress that is happening now possible. The cost of that has been enormous.

aching. In Matthew, they say *well, if that's the case, it's better not to marry*. Jesus' elevation of children in other texts also undermined the patriarchal family<sup>2</sup>.

The four gospels have different ways of presenting the subject of purity; they can't be synthesised. However, there is one point on which they all agree: for Christians, physical purity is no longer the key to their relationship with God.

## Celibacy is 'a gift'

Writing of marriage, Paul acknowledges sexual desire as a fact of human life that must be reckoned with intelligently and faithfully. He sees celibacy as the preferred state living in these end times, but if a person couldn't control their sexual urges, they should marry. He also acknowledged that celibacy was a gift. All Christians were to exercise their sexuality to forms consistent with the fact that they belong to Christ.

Arguably, then, from the New Testament onward, all genuinely Christian ethics had to explain themselves in terms of purity of heart, rather than following the physical purity laws of the Torah, purity of heart being defined as willingness to respect and unwillingness to harm the neighbour – The great commandment: Love God, love your neighbour as yourself.<sup>4</sup>

Not only the sexual ethics that were crafted in early Christianity met this standard! We would all be in a better place now. But Christian tradition evolved in a soup of Greco-Roman philosophy and anti-Gnostic ideas that marked and marred the early Christian understanding of sex. There was a widespread revulsion toward the body in late antiquity, which affected the growing Christian movement<sup>5</sup>. Moreover appropriate sexual expression came to be defined as penile-vaginal intercourse, justified by procreation – which arose out of Stoic philosophical and anti-Gnostic influences and what would eventually come to be called natural law thinking.

From early on, the Christian tradition (like Jewish tradition) was intellectually lively, with argument and disputation enabling a dynamic evolution. The history of sex in the Christian tradition illustrates this. Early Christian writers in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries display strong anti-flesh sentiment: Tertullian said that women were the gateway to the devil, Jerome said *Blessed is the man who dashes his genitals against a stone*, Origen is said to have castrated himself 'for the kingdom', and of course our main man, Augustine, viewed sexual desire as a tendency to evil. But even early on there was a minority voice: Pseudo-Dionysius, writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, described God as *eros*, the one who causes and is love. His writing was taken up again in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The 12<sup>th</sup> century rise of courtly love challenged the procreation ethic and theory of marriage.

The Middle Ages in Western Europe saw a more general flowering of the language of love, desire, longing, marriage and sometimes an explicitly sexual vocabulary of kisses and even intercourse to describe relationship with God and the experience of ecstatic union in the writings of certain mystics: the beguine Hadewijch, Margery Kemp, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross and others. Note the gender of some of these notables; a number of women's voices brought sexuality and spirituality together. At the same time, arguments arose that sexual intercourse in marriage was good and godly for more than procreative purposes and justified for its own sake, intimating a link between ritual love and sexual pleasure.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that pillar of the Reformation, John Calvin, af-

firmed that the greatest good of marriage and intercourse is the mutual society that is formed between husband and wife.<sup>6</sup> The Protestant Reformation freed sexual expression from purely procreative intent. To this day the Roman Catholic magisterium is in bondage to the idea that the only good sex is sex that takes place in a heterosexual marriage and is open to procreation.

And the struggle has continued. In our lifetimes, the availability of birth control, the emancipation of women, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the acknowledged existence of transsexual people and intersexual people have all entered into the conversation and driven the Church to revisit and, for some, to reimagine its tradition. There are now life-giving streams coursing through desert of even the driest, most death-dealing parts of the tradition.

Christianity owes a huge debt particularly to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual Christians who have stayed in what has been – and too often still is – a toxic Church. It has been their presence, their courage and their vulnerability that has made some of the progress that is happening now possible. The cost of that has been enormous.

Two months ago the Oasis Foundation published a report titled: *In the Name of Love: The Church, Exclusion and LGB Mental Health Issues*, making explicit the link between the Church's teaching and actions on the mental health and well-being of lesbian, gay and bisexual people (Chalke, Sansbury, and Streeter 2017). It is available here: <http://bit.ly/2ooi0WK> and well worth a read. Alongside calling more traditional churches to repent and to fund mental health services, the report calls on inclusive churches like Unitarians and people to continue to speak loudly and passionately on sexual justice issues. We can be life-giving water.

Since the 1970s there has been an explosion of Christian scholarship about sex and the body and of advocacy groups. Some writers delve more deeply into the tradition, as far back as the Church Fathers, and find there fresh insights. Others apply critical thinking to the Biblical texts or bring insights from psychology and other social and biological sciences. Within a generation, there has appeared a wide range of theologies to wrestle these questions: sexual theology, feminist theology, body theology, lesbian and gay theology, indecent theology, sexual liberation theology and most recently queer theology. Also in this country in the last few decades a number of non-profit organisations have taken up the work of critically and constructively engaging the tradition including the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality (<http://christianityandsexuality.org/>) which is involved in the publication of the journal *Theology and Sexuality* and groups that advocate within the Church for inclusion of LGBT people like Changing Attitude and the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, now joined together as OneBodyOneFaith <http://www.onebodyonefaith.org.uk/>. A number of local churches around the country have declared an affirming welcome and have ministry with LGBT people, such as Open Table at St Bride's in Liverpool and FirstSunday at St Columba's in Oxford.

There is a lot going on, thanks be to God.

In part 2, to be published in the 20 May issue of *The Inquirer*, the Rev Grosch-Miller will address how our experience of sex can tell us something about God; how the Divine is revealed in the ordinary and extraordinary ways we learn to live in our flesh.

*The Rev Carla A Grosch-Miller is a United Reformed minister and theological educator specialising in sex and ministry short courses for various ministry-training colleges.*

1 Carr, David M. 2003. *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p50

3 *ibid*, 123

4 *ibid*, 125

5 *ibid*, 127

6 Farley, Edward. 1988. *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. p63



# So, what is religion all about?

The Rev Sue Woolley's announcement of her survey on what Unitarians believe (*Inquirer*, 8 April) got me thinking.

I do not mean to tread on Sue's toes as I think her idea of a survey of spirituality in the movement is a very good one and I hope that more than a miserable quarter of our members will volunteer to fill it in. Even if you decide, for whatever reason, not to send it, the process of thinking about your own spirituality can only be beneficial.

And we should do more of it, not only individually but also collectively. I have used the creed from Robert Fulghum's book *All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* in a service during which I asked people to write their own creed. That was interesting. My friend, Alison, once challenged us during a service to draw a picture of God. That was also beneficial.

Many moons ago (2012) I asked you *Inquirer* readers to do this:

*Perhaps you could hold another circle service. Give everyone four large sticky notes. On each of the first three you are to write one of the reasons why you worship. Then read each others' and discuss them. You might end up with a poster for your notice board which reads: 'We worship here. This is why.' Use your fourth note to state what you like best in a service and why, or what you would like more of and why, or what you don't currently get in the services but would like and why. You could end up with a second poster: 'And this is how we do it. And why.'*

It is very, very important to think about Syria and racism but it is more important in the first place to sort out why you call yourself a religious person, why you go to church.

Religious people are very bad at talking about religion. Unitarians are very good at encouraging interfaith worship and looking at what unites us all. And, of course, we find that the real unifying point is not God or good and evil but living in community. Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Give unto others what they want. Love thy neighbour as thyself.

There is a lovely story about Rabbi Hillel. Someone said to him that if he, Hillel, recited the books of the Torah standing on one leg, then he, the questioner, would convert to Judaism. Hillel stood on one leg and said: 'Love the Lord thy God and thy neighbour as thyself. That is the law, all the rest is commentary.' And, of course, all the holy books are littered with injunctions to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend the sick and visit the prisoner. Given that the state has taken on the responsibility for the first three, one would imagine that every prison would be stuffed to the ginnels with the religious demanding the right to visit at least one prisoner. But no. For which, no doubt, the prisoners are highly relieved. Not every one makes a good prison visitor.

[Digression: But every Unitarian should be interested in the prisoners given that we have the admirable Penal Affairs Panel. You have got one member of the congregation to subscribe to the newsletter – [bruce\\_chilton@hotmail.com](mailto:bruce_chilton@hotmail.com) – haven't you? And they then pin it up on the notice board for you all to read.]

Sorry, where was I? Oh, yes. Religion is mostly about living well in community – that is the love your neighbour bit. Which is not, as we all know, the easiest thing to do and so many a church service is taken up with examining different aspects of



this central message.

But then we come to the 'Love God' bit which is much more difficult. Loving God was easy when you had an old man in a nighty who handed out sweeties or hurricanes dependent on your prayers or his inexplicable whim. But when your idea of God becomes the Divine Essence or Spirit of all Being, then it is much more difficult. Which is where individual and collective spirituality comes in, along with personal creeds, pictures of God and how and why we worship.

I am really looking forward to the outcome of Sue's survey and I am sure it will help with me on my spiritual path. And perhaps, I shall find others willing to talk about their spiritual journey with me.

*Dorothy Houghton is a service leader in the Midlands.*

## Notice

### General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

#### CO-OPTION OF THREE MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Executive Committee is seeking applications for three co-opted members to serve from July 2017 until the end of the Annual Meetings in April 2019.

Applicants should demonstrate 3 years active commitment to the Unitarian community, be in sympathy with the Objects of the General Assembly and be eligible to stand in accordance with legal requirements for charity trusteeship.

#### Essential Requirements:

(1) Experience in one or other of the following:

- As an officer or member of a congregational/district governing body, a committee of an affiliated body or of a charity trustee body or similar eg voluntary organisations such as a sports club or PTA.
- As a Minister, Lay Pastor, Approved Lay Leader or Lay Person in Charge of a Unitarian congregation.

(2) Good understanding of the Unitarian community.

(3) Confidentiality.

A trustee skills audit has been undertaken which has shown that the new EC would benefit from members with knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- Diversity
- Skills and Competency assessment
- Working with young people

We would also like to strengthen the EC in the following areas:

- Faith and spirituality
- Marketing, media, PR and campaigning
- Finance and Fundraising

Those interested should contact Derek McAuley, GA Chief Officer at [dmcawley@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:dmcawley@unitarian.org.uk) for further information. Applicants should complete the application form and declaration and return to Mary-Jean Hennis Mhennis@unitarian.org.uk by 12.00noon on Friday 12 May 2017 to enable consideration by the Executive Committee at their meeting on 19/20 May 2017.

Derek McAuley  
Chief Officer



# Love thy neighbour? Not so much

By Christine Avery

Love? – not actually

I take it that Unitarianism is a faith for seekers and questioners, people who want to enlarge their vision and move forward in understanding.

With this in mind, I would like to question the value of the idea of “loving your neighbour as yourself”. The commandment is, of course, one of the hoary and hallowed Old Testament ten. But I suggest that it is both superficial and a source of false and sentimental thinking.

I know that I love my family and friends, beauty wherever I can perceive it (which is most especially in nature), and I love words and good literature. This love is something warm and energetic – at best – sometimes it flags a bit too. But it is real. By contrast, loving my neighbour as myself is an unrealistic, head-in-the-clouds demand. It is strictly and soberly impossible.

I can *have goodwill* towards the whole of the human race. But loving is a different matter. My authentic reaction to a terrorist killer is worlds away from my feeling for and disposition towards anyone who seems to represent human decency. If the killer literally became my neighbour I would find this situation frightening and unacceptable – a problem which the state should take action against, without respect for the opinions of the killer.

We live in a world of violence and need – the two being bound up together at the roots. Both justice and enlightened self-interest dictate that we should respond to this fact in an intelligent and energetic way. The ideal of justice, together with self-interest, can drive us as individuals (or as a part of a campaigning group) towards charitable giving, writing or speaking to one’s MP, demonstrating and campaigning for the reduction of poverty and other evils.

This is so far quite secular – humanist and rational. But perhaps there is another level for us as people with rationality-transcending vision? Does religious idealism enable you to see

a shining ideal on the horizon – a world in which every single individual on earth is enlightened and fully participating on the creative god-nature of the miraculous universe? This is clearly not going to happen any time soon. Should we therefore be permanently anguished about the reality of life on this planet, and exhaust ourselves in a hopeless struggle to follow our ethical demand and make the whole human race happy?

Common sense and humour both come to the rescue, but they bring with them a questioning doubt about whether common sense and humour, those perennial resources of the human spirit, are indeed morally adequate when we reach the ultimate questions. Both on the level of personal relations and on the political, world-changing level, boundaries and barriers, incomprehension and lack of perfect knowledge all seem to be built in to our starting situation. It is surely worth emphasising that there is nothing definable as “evil” in this human predicament. The old religious idea of “repentance for our sins” is misguided to the point of being actively toxic. We are limited rather than hell-bent on doing bad things, and consequently we should, perhaps, be less fierce and condemnatory when our leaders make mistakes.

The upshot is that life is far too difficult, mysterious and stubbornly real for such nonsense as “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Human nature has to be carefully studied and wisely judged by anyone presuming to make moral demands. But then I think of the fact that infants (the word meaning literally, non-talkers) almost always learn to talk and some linguists have compared the difficulty of this feat to the achievement of the skills needed for classical ballet. We could yet make a leap forward in global understanding and goodwill. But please, can we struggle out of the swaddling bands of beginners’ ethics such as “love your neighbour as yourself”? Can we think and study and debate and act in the pursuit of new ways of being real – and, on that firm basis, as good as humanly possible?

*Christine Avery, Member of Plymouth Unitarians.*



## A Meditation by Tony McNeile

Let us take some moments for reflection and contemplation. To let our minds be still of all everyday thoughts and focus on that quiet centre of our own selves where the soul has its place. The soul of each of us is like a quiet, dark emptiness above the water that the breath of God moved across in creation. Within the darkness is the sacred light. It does not shine. It cannot be seen. But it is eternal. It moves with the whole dark universe of clouds and galaxies and constellations. It is part of God’s breath held within our spirits. The breath created life and saw that it was good.

We contemplate the world around us and all its beauty – which can be so peaceful and also so violent with its storms and catastrophes – we contemplate the world of living things – hierarchy upon hierarchy – animals of exquisite beauty and plants and trees the same – they compete for life and they compete for space and yet within the serenity of mountains and seas and within all the tumultuous moving storms the still small breath of God moves calmly on – and our spirits with the sacred light move with it. We are part of all creation.

Our own lives, like the cosmos and like the natural world have times of stillness and time of tumult; we have to find our place in the world and compete for our space. But within us we have the breath of God – the sacred light held in darkness – that does not shine – that cannot be seen. It is when we pray, when we reflect, when we contemplate we find comfort in the darkness.



# Sometimes the truth only takes a minute

*The Truth in 60 Seconds: 99 Tales to Set Your Inner Clock* By Art Lester  
£11.95 ISBN-10: 1326736329

Review by Bill Darlison

'The shortest distance between a human being and the truth is a story.' So said the Indian Jesuit, Anthony de Mello, whose immensely popular works were frowned upon by the Catholic hierarchy. I remember seeing a cautionary notice in a Catholic bookshop in Dublin which said something like: 'The works of Anthony de Mello are available here, but readers are warned that some of his teachings are incompatible with the Catholic faith'.

Indeed, his teaching about the importance of stories was hardly likely to find favour with an institution which generally proclaims that the shortest distance between a human being and the truth is a *creed*. The difference couldn't be more marked or more important. A creed is a series of conclusions, a summary of other people's ideas about the nature and purpose of existence, which we are encouraged to learn, to recite, and to 'believe'. On the other hand, a story – the preferred method of spiritual teachers throughout history – is an invitation to imaginative participation, encouraging us to explore, to investigate, to reflect, to discuss, and to come to our own conclusions. The most important religious divide is precisely here. Despite the labels we give ourselves – Christian, Buddhist, Jew, Muslim, Atheist, etc., – there are really only two categories among the religious: we are either people of the creed or people of the story.

And Unitarians, with our renowned rejection of creeds, are people of the story. Over the past two decades, stories drawn from all the spiritual traditions have become a fixture in our services and, even when children are not present, the adults will often feel cheated if they are not treated to a story. Intriguingly, as all worship-leaders can testify, it is usually the story that is remembered long after the address has been forgotten.

All Unitarian story-lovers will welcome this new collection from master storyteller, Art Lester, minister to Croydon Unitarians. It consists of 99 tales, some old and familiar, many brand new and original, but all wittily and engagingly told. In addition, the book is beautifully produced and delightfully illustrated by Art's friend, the *Guardian* cartoonist, Stephen Appleby.

This collection is a real godsend to worship-leaders who are constantly on the lookout for suitable material to use as

readings or as inspiration for sermons, but it is also valuable as a source of inspiration to everyone who is engaged on the spiritual quest, and would be ideal for discussion groups. I used two of the stories in recent services in Ireland but over the past few months I have also been using the book as part of my daily 'reflection time', and the stories have unfailingly amused, entertained, and challenged me.

Eight of the stories are specifically aimed at children, and many of the rest can no doubt be adapted for telling to children, but this is not a children's book. It is a serious attempt to present some of the most profound insights of ancient and contemporary spiritual teachers in an appealing and accessible way. And the attempt succeeds admirably.

Consider the following story and ask yourself, what 'truth' is presented for our consideration here, and why is it presented like this and not as a series of statements?



## On Your Bike

*There was a great Zen teacher who invited five of his best students to his home. All arrived riding their bicycles. When they had dismounted, the teacher asked them, 'Why are you riding your bicycles?'*

*The first student replied, 'I need my bicycle to more easily carry all these books I read about enlightenment.'*

*The teacher said, 'Continue studying until you become wise. Sit here, at my feet.'*

*The second student replied, 'I ride my bicycle because I love to look at the beautiful scenery as I pass through.' The teacher praised the student: 'You are developing aesthetic sensibility. Sit here at my feet.'*

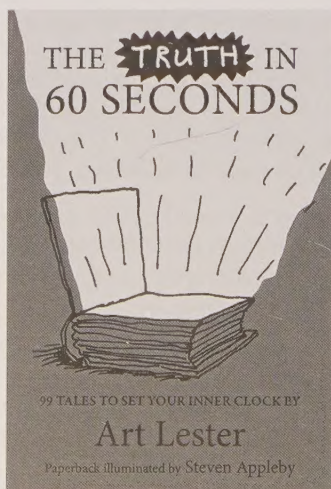
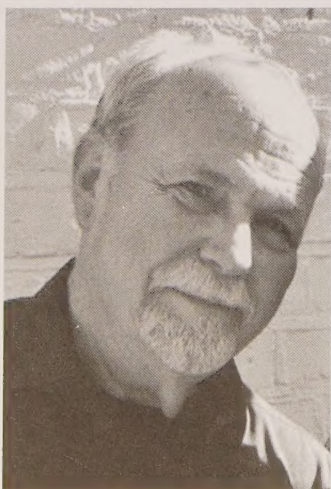
*The third student replied, 'When I ride my bicycle, I am able to forget other things and chant the sacred mantra.' The teacher congratulated the student, 'Your practice will one day liberate you. Sit here at my feet.'*

*The fourth student answered, 'Riding my bicycle, I feel in touch with nature and all beings.' The teacher smiled and said, 'You are learning the path of compassion. Sit here at my feet.'*

*When questioned, the last student said, 'I ride my bicycle to ride my bicycle.' Without a word, the teacher went over and sat at his feet.'*

This book is set to become a classic and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

The Rev Bill Darlison is a retired Unitarian minister. 'The Truth in 60 Seconds' is available on Amazon here: <http://amzn.to/2ozdAhV>





# Practical actions to make a difference

(Continued from page 12)

international environment.

On a personal level it is relatively easy to work out an approximation of our personal carbon dioxide emission (excluding breathing that is!). If you look at [www.carbonfootprint.com](http://www.carbonfootprint.com) you can input your own information and it will calculate your footprint. My wife and I did that calculation for our lifestyle and the results (in tonnes of carbon dioxide) were: House 1.65, Flights 2.22, Car 5.84, Bus/Rail 0.17, Secondary 4.42. Giving a total of 14.3 for the two of us. The UK Average is 9.8 tonnes per person. I don't know if anyone else in our chapel has calculated their own carbon footprint but we will be encouraging everyone to do so.

As a practical approach to help our members and attendees consider everyday aspects of life and how they might lessen their impact on the environment Jean produced a list of suggestions for Caring for the Environment that everyone could consider. A copy of the list was given out in our bi-monthly newsletter and everyone was asked to complete and return it. Twenty-four participants responded to this request. The list below shows the questions asked and the % response to each question:

1. Use any leftover food towards another meal. 100% agreed to do this.
2. Use a lower temperature for the washing machine. 100% agreed to do this.
3. Only have one 'airport' holiday a year. 40% agreed to do this.
4. Drive a 'low on fuel' car. 50% agreed to do this.
5. Buy second-hand goods and clothes. 70% agreed to do this.
6. Grow more flowers to encourage wild life. 50% agreed to do this.
7. Only use the dishwasher or clothes washer when full. 90% agreed to do this.
8. Have thermostats in each room in your home. 90% agreed to do this.
9. Recycle clothes and goods. 100% agreed to do this

This list takes a wider view of the environment and considers not just carbon footprint, but also our impact on different aspects of our environment. For example, it is not the objective of this article to persuade anyone to become a vegetarian but the production of meat for human consumption is a very inefficient use of land and has a high carbon footprint and also a high water footprint.

Water footprint, also called embedded water or virtual water, is a measure of the water used to produce an item. For example, for beef produced in an industrial farming system it takes on average three years before a cow is slaughtered to produce about 200 kg of boneless beef. In that time it consumes nearly 1,300 kg of grains, 7,200 kg of roughages, 24 cubic metres of water for drinking and 7 cubic metres of water for servicing. This means that to produce one kilogram of boneless beef, we use about 6.5 kg of grain, 36 kg of roughages, and 155 litres of water (only for drinking and servicing). Producing the volume of feed requires an additional 15,340 litres of water on average.

It is surprising how much water is 'embedded' in common products, e.g.: Beer (250 ml) has 75 litres, coffee (125 ml) has 140 litres, 1 slice of bread (30 gm) has 40 litres and 1 pair



GraphicStock image

of leather shoes has 8,000 litres. Many developing countries have insufficient water to drink but factories built by 1st world companies making food, clothing and electrical goods for the western world are using vast amounts of that scarce resource.

Some of the people who responded to the list also made suggestions about other possible actions, e.g. that we agree to buy LED bulbs, to turn the heating thermostats down one degree, to buy UK products (considering air miles) and to recycle waste.

Recycling is a very important thing to consider, in addition to reducing our carbon footprint recycling is a very important way to minimise the waste of the world's resources. Did you know that:

- One recycled tin can would save enough energy to power a television for 3 hours.
- One recycled glass bottle would save enough energy to power a computer for 25 minutes.
- One recycled plastic bottle would save enough energy to power a 60-watt light bulb for 3 hours.
- 70% less energy is required to recycle paper compared with making it from raw materials

Recent government figures for England show that in 2014 the household recycling rate reached 44.8%, up from 44.2% in 2013 and up almost 4% since 2010, the earliest year for which data is available. (The EU target is for UK to recycle at least 50% of household waste by 2020.)

In 2014 the total 'waste from households' amounted to 413 kg per person, up from 402 kg per person in 2013 so while we are recycling more we are producing more waste too! (Please recycle this publication when you have finished enjoying it!) If your congregation wants to follow up on the GA initiative, please feel free to use the above questionnaire as a way of getting people thinking about what to do on an individual level to make this a greener world. Please also remember that action can produce positive results while doing nothing will typically result in nothing changing - and Keep Recycling.

*Dr John Hutcheson is a member of Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford.*



# Earth Day 2017 – what can we all do?



*Pixabay image*

## **By John Hutcheson**

At this year's General Assembly, the Building Advisory Group reported on what progress has been made on reducing the denomination's carbon footprint. As today is Earth Day, this is a good time to review what we as individuals and congregations can do.

When the Rev Jean Bradley returned back to Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford, this was one of the subjects discussed within our committee and one action that resulted was the creation of a survey and commitment form which was signed by members of our congregation.

We are only a small congregation within a relatively small organisation so it isn't possible to make big changes happen – or is it? Just taking three examples from recent history it is interesting to see what effect the actions of one person can have when the circumstances are right.

In 1955 black seamstress Rosa Parks (1913–2005) refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus, initiating the US civil rights movement.

In 2015 Katie Cutler learned that Alan Barnes, who is visually impaired, was too afraid to return to his home after an attack. Katie set up a fund-raising page. Within days the fund had reached £300,000.

Early on in his career Chad Varah conducted the funeral of a girl aged 14 believed she had a sexually transmitted disease and took her own life. When Chad joined the parish of St Stephen in 1953 he launched what he called a '999 for the suicidal'. He was, in his own words, 'a man willing to listen, with a base and an emergency telephone'. This grew into the Samaritans.

All three of these examples are about people whose actions led to changes massively larger than anything they anticipated.

But how can we help a global issue? Still, even small changes, over time, can make a difference. One drop of water every few seconds dripping in a cave in a limestone area can lead to a stalagmite several metres tall over hundreds of years! Or

to take a possibly more relevant example: in 2014 there were 18.6 million families in the UK; if every one of them turned off one 60 watt light bulb for one hour they would save the country 1,116 million Watts, approximately the output of a nuclear power station in one hour. Therefore, that very small saving by every family could give a significant power saving to the country.

Good Energy is a company founded in 1999 with the mission to transform the UK energy market by helping homes and businesses to be part of a sustainable solution to climate change. By joining Good Energy they claim you join a community of homes and businesses that either:

- Buys 100% renewable electricity and green gas, through switching their supply
- Generates renewable power in their own homes, or
- Invests in renewable power as a shareholder of Good Energy.

They claim that simply switching to Good Energy could cut your carbon footprint by up to 50% and means that the UK has to import fewer fossil fuels from abroad. I am not a customer of Good Energy and I am not promoting their business or suggesting that you change to them as a supplier but if renewable electricity is a way of minimising or reducing global warming imagine if the whole UK population changed to Good Energy as their electricity supplier – we would massively reduce the carbon footprint of the UK. Of course that couldn't happen because there is not enough renewable energy to cope with the demand and you couldn't persuade everyone to do it but just imagine the possible effect on the environment...

Unitarians regard the maintenance of a sustainable, diverse and beautiful environment – natural and human – as essential both for our survival and for our wellbeing as a species.

Looking at the Chapels is just a start. We can all be personally involved in considering not only our carbon footprint but also different aspects of our impact on our local, national and

*(Continued on page 11)*